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SUBJECT: Roma education in Latvia

¶1. Summary: The available statistical data and reports of educators reveal that Latvia's comparatively small Roma community educational achievements at all levels lags far behind the average national level. Individual initiatives, mainly special segregated classes for Roma, aimed at tackling underachievement and low inclusion rate were launched in the beginning of the decade, but have met with little or no success. Human rights organizations argued that these initiatives were, in fact, discriminatory towards Roma. 2006 marked changes in the official attitude towards the Roma. The government adopted the "National Action Plan 'Roma in Latvia' 2007 - 2009" aimed at combating discrimination against Roma in Latvia in three fields, including education. Despite a general positive evaluation of the government's initiative, educators and NGOs have doubted there will be successful implementation of the plan due to a number of shortcomings, including insufficient funding. End summary.

¶2. Scarce statistical data available on the inclusion and achievement of Roma children within the Latvian education system reveals a rather dramatic picture: among the 5,985 Roma who were 15 years old or older at the time of the last population census in 2000, 24.3 percent had finished only three, two or one grade or even had not been to school at all, while only 26 of all Latvia's Roma had graduated from university. (Note: education in Latvia is compulsory through age 16. End note.) Though no data is available on the number of illiterate persons according to their ethnicity at national level, the data of one national agency - the National Employment Agency - shows that 85 percent of illiterates registered with the Agency are Roma. There is no official data whether all Roma children are enrolled in schools and their attendance and drop-out rates. However, a number of school administration representatives and teachers have admitted to especially low rates of enrollment and attendance and high drop-out rates among Roma. The only available official numbers indicate a constant decrease of the number of Roma children officially enrolled in public mainstream schools by about 100 children a year since 2003. Experts note that the drop raises serious concern since the Roma community is the only minority group in Latvia which has a positive demographic trend. Additionally, official statistics show a very low rate of Roma emigration to other EU countries. Therefore, the drop in enrollment might be explained by either a continuous inability of the Latvian education system to include Roma children or a high rate of unofficial Roma emigration or a combination of both.

¶3. Despite dramatic statistics, until 2006 no national and comprehensive measures were taken to improve the situation of Roma in the field of education. The attempts to integrate Roma, usually through special segregated classes for Roma, were made by individual municipalities and schools in all places where the number of Roma was high and was approved by local and national officials. The majority of these segregated classes were opened around 2000 and over the period 2003 - 2006 there were seven segregated classes and one segregated school. No official evaluations of the segregated practices were carried out; however, human right NGOs voiced concern about their compliance with minority education and human right standards. Although there were no official instructions to close the segregated classes, only one such class remains in operation. The educators who implemented these practices claimed that segregated classes were closed due to lack of Roma children to attend, while

NGO's believe that greater education of parents to the dangers of a segregated education changed their choice of schooling options for their children.

¶4. The National Action Plan "Roma in Latvia" 2007-2009 is the first comprehensive attempt by the government to fight discrimination against Roma and improve their situation. The Plan focuses on the two key tasks in the field of education: gradual transfer of Romani children from segregated classes to mainstream classes, and increasing availability of preparatory classes for Roma students in all regions inhabited by Roma. A small regional NGO, Centre for Education Initiatives, was among main contributors to the development of the Plan and was also designated as a main institution responsible for implementation of most of the educational activities.

¶5. In 2007, CEI received funding for the implementation of some activities foreseen by the Plan. Daiga Zake, CEI's coordinator of the National Action Plan, voiced concern about the possibility to implement the Plan fully. Zake pointed out that the Plan does not include development and distribution of specific teaching aids and text books, the Plan does not include sufficient training for teachers' assistants of Roma origin, and it lacks any activities concerning work with Roma parents and formation of support centers for them. She also added that lot of work is needed to raise awareness among the general public since the majority believes that there would not be any problems if "Roma have the same life-style as we do."

¶6. Comment. It will require strong political commitment, including financial resources, to achieve changes in the situation of Roma, including and particularly in education. Another major challenge is to achieve changes in a dominant perception of mainstream society that Roma do not want to study and that they are not capable of

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following a mainstream school curriculum. In addition, overall changes in the Latvian education system are needed to make it more inclusive (not only for Roma children but also children of any other minority background, children with special needs, etc). Integration of Roma will be successful if these challenges are addressed. That would require much deeper structural changes within the education system than are likely in the near-term, but the action plan is an important first step.

SELDOWITZ